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***Archaeology of power in the rural cemeteries of Western Liguria Maritima
between Late Antiquity and the beginning of the Early Middle Ages***

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ARCHAEOLOGY OF POWER IN THE RURAL CEMETERIES
OF WESTERN *LIGURIA MARITIMA* BETWEEN LATE ANTIQUITY AND
THE BEGINNING OF THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Abstract

Questo contributo prende in esame i riti funerari attestati nelle principali necropoli rurali della Liguria occidentale tra il tardo antico e i primi secoli altomedievali. La fine del potere politico romano determinò il passaggio di tutto il territorio ligure sotto il controllo prima di Odoacre e poi degli Ostrogoti con la breve parentesi caratterizzata dalla rioccupazione bizantina che precede la conquista longobarda nel 643. Il dato archeologico verrà utilizzato al fine di verificare se in questo periodo intercorsero cambiamenti di qualche tipo nella cultura funeraria delle popolazioni autoctone, quali furono le caratteristiche di questi cambiamenti e quale fu la sintesi finale di questi processi di trasformazione. Occorre considerare che nelle aree interne del territorio ligure, nella fase fondamentale di passaggio tra tardo antico e alto medioevo, la cristianizzazione delle campagne non aveva ancora potuto consolidarsi completamente e quindi, nonostante otto secoli di occupazione e cultura romana, erano ancora molto diffusi nelle popolazioni locali culti pagani e credenze naturali.

1. Introduction

In *Liguria Maritima* the distribution of the cemeteries that developed between Late Antiquity and the beginning of the Early Middle Ages is highly diversified. It should be recalled that Liguria and southern Piedmont, part of the *IX Regio* as a result of the organisation and territorial division introduced by Augustus, remained under Roman control until 476 when the two areas followed different political paths. No significant traces of the first Germanic dominations in Italy, i.e. the kingdom of Odoacer and then Theodoric, remain in *Liguria Maritima*, whereas there is much more interesting evidence of the subsequent Byzantine phase, which precedes the Langobard conquest and domination by roughly a third of a century.

This study examines the graves identified in the rural areas of Western Liguria, the extension of which corresponds to approximately half the overall surface area of this region and coincides with the western part of *Liguria Maritima*.

After the phase of conquest and progressive submission, the Roman political

authorities had established four *municipia* as political-administrative reference centres, known for certain to be *Genua*-Genoa, *Luna*-Luni, *Albingaunum*-Albenga and *Albintimilium*-Ventimiglia or presumed, as in the case of *Vada Sabatia*-Vado Ligure or Savona¹. Following an imaginary line from East to West, the *municipia* forming part of Western Liguria were *Vada Sabatia*, *Albingaunum* and *Albintimilium*. There were also numerous *statio* or *mansiones* positioned along the major road that crossed the Ligurian territory parallel to the coastline, the *via Aurelia per Tusciam et Alpes Maritimas Arelatum usque*. Two other roads, the *via Iulia Augusta* and the *via Postumia*, connected the *IX Regio* with two regions fundamental for development of the Roman economic policy in the central-northern part of the peninsula, i.e. with the *Regio XI «Transpadana»* and the *Regio VII «Aemilia»*² (fig. 1).

As regards western *Liguria Maritima*, the subject of this study, a uniform picture emerges of the distribution of Late Antique and early medieval cemeteries which are identified either in relation to the abandonment of large Roman agricultural properties, as in the case of *Alba Docilia* (Savona-Albisola), San Pietro in Carpignano (Savona-Quiliano), Corti (Savona-Pietra Ligure), or medium or small-sized properties, like Isasco and Perti (Savona-Finale Ligure), Noli and Varigotti (Savona) or are connected with the development of important early Christian religious buildings, such as San Paragorio (Savona-Noli), San Giovanni Battista (Savona-Finale Ligure) and Riva Ligure (Imperia-Capo Don)³. A very interesting second element, which recurs in some of the cemeteries of Isasco, Perti and Noli, is the continuing use of the burial site in both the cremation and inhumation phases, evidence of the prolonged life of the surrounding community in the Roman-Republican and Late Antique periods (fig. 2).

2. The conquest of burial space in the Roman villas

A constant cultural feature of both eastern and western Liguria is the «reoccupation» in the Late Antique and early medieval centuries of Roman residences by cemeteries of modest dimensions and by Christian religious buildings. In the Savona areas, in addition to the study of baptismal churches, particular attention has been paid in recent years to the rural churches: with what was mainly a funerary function, they were usually located along important roads in the ancient communication system. Specific excavations have been carried out in the territory of *Vada Sabatia* and Val Bormida⁴.

The present-day Romanesque churches of San Pietro in Carpignano and San Pietro di Albisola, both built inside Roman villas, are thought to be of early Christian-early medieval origin. The former probably had a funerary function while the latter is located in the extensive archaeological area adjacent to the train station of Albisola

¹ MURIALDO 2001, p. 772; BULGARELLI 2007, pp. 339-341.

² BULGARELLI-FRONDONI-MURIALDO 2005, pp. 132-133; BULGARELLI 2007, p. 345; FRONDONI 2007b, p. 380; FRONDONI 2008, p. 171.

³ FRONDONI 2007, p. 751.

⁴ BULGARELLI 2003, pp. 171-174; BULGARELLI-FRONDONI-MURIALDO 2005, pp. 137-138; FRONDONI 2007a, p. 752; FRONDONI 2008, p. 172.

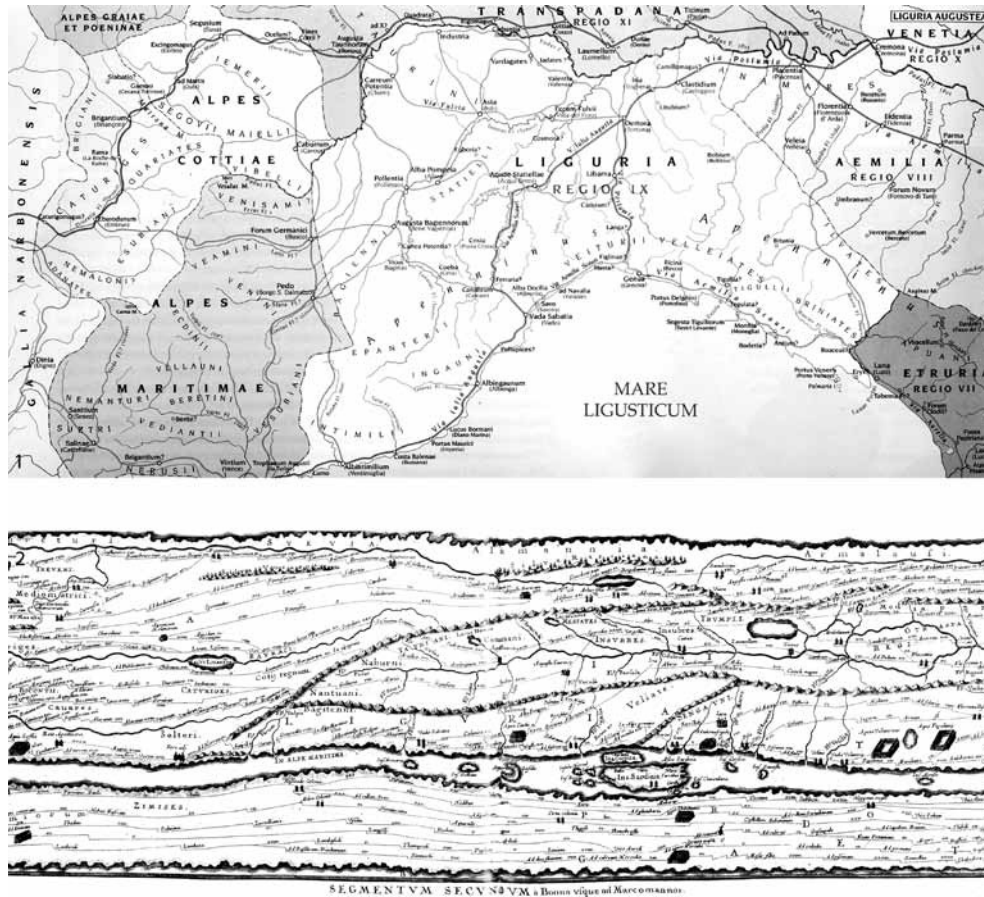


Fig. 1. Map of ancient *Liguria* indicating the Roman *municipia* (a) and excerpt of the *Tabula Peutingeriana* (b)

Superiore, where the remains of the residential and rustic parts of a villa and a bath complex belonging to the Imperial Age have been brought to light. A burial ground that developed between the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century in an abandoned part of the Roman settlement was probably connected with the church of S. Pietro, founded on the same Roman constructions. This religious building was traditionally considered the parish church but it now seems more likely that it was the funerary church, perhaps founded by the private *possessores* of the villa⁵ (fig. 3).

The excavations at San Pietro in Carpignano provided very important information. The small rural religious building is located in the territory of the Roman town of *Vada*

⁵ MENNELLA-COCCOLUTO 1995, pp. 82-83; BULGARELLI-MELLI 2001, pp. 122-124; MURIALDO 2001, p. 771; BULGARELLI-FRONDONI-MURIALDO 2005, pp. 137-139; MENNELLA-BULGARELLI 2006, pp. 64-67; FRONDONI 2007a, pp. 752-753; BULGARELLI 2007, p. 343; FRONDONI 2008, pp. 171-172; BULGARELLI-MENNELLA 2008, p. 290.

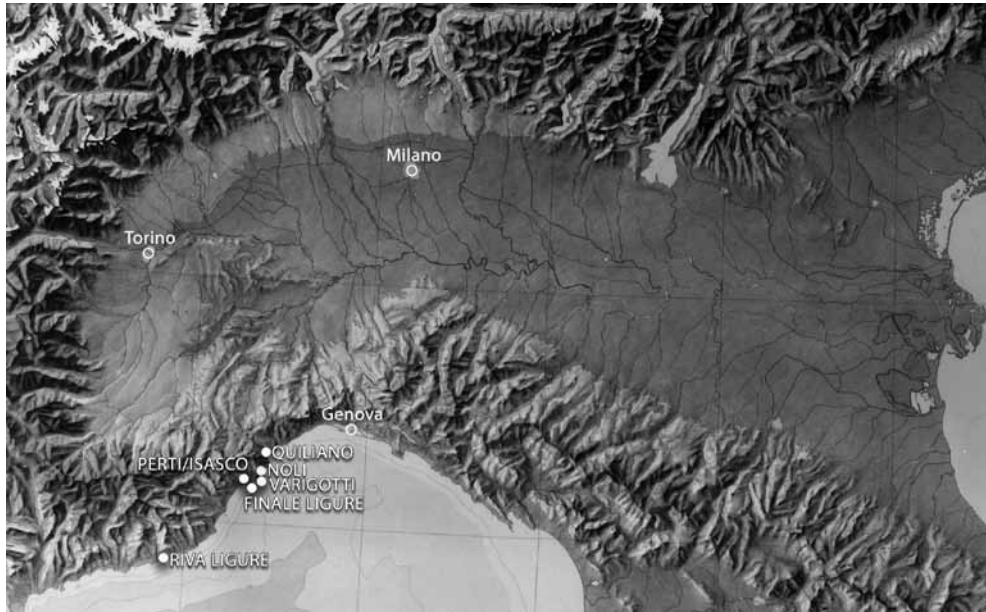


Fig. 2. Map of the central-northern Italian peninsula highlighting the Ligurian territory and the areas cited in the text.

Sabatia, on the left bank of the Quiliano, a local stream. Here again, on the remains of a Roman farm, a cemetery developed in the 6th century with various types of burials: in a simple pit, “cappuccina” or brick coffin. The funerary epigraphic fragment of *Archadius*, dated to the 7th-8th century, which re-uses the back of a white marble epigraph of the 1st-2nd century, was probably part of a privileged burial. The Imperial Age *titulus*, together with the cover of a cinerary urn, indicates the presence of a Roman necropolis, which ran along the consular road from *Vada Sabatia*, or a cemeterial complex connected to the *fundus*, containing the graves of both landowners and farm hands⁶.

In the rural settlements of Albisola Superiore-San Pietro and Quiliano-San Pietro in Carpignano, which can be identified as villas or large farms, there is substantial evidence to confirm the existence of a quality residential area, while excavations at Corti, between Tovo San Giacomo and Giustenice, in the immediate hinterland of Pietra Ligure, and therefore in the territory of the *municipium di Albingaunum*, have discovered facilities for processing agricultural and animal products⁷. In the plain between the streams Scarincio and Maremola, to the west of the presumed municipal limit of *Vada Sabatia*, excavations have discovered a production area of what was thought to be a Roman villa dating to the late Republican period which became a

⁶ MASSABÒ 1999, pp. 13-15; CHIOCCI 1999, pp. 63-66; MURIALDO-PALAZZI-AROBBA 2001, pp. 54-55.

⁷ CHIOCCI 1999, pp. 62-63; MURIALDO 2001, p. 789; BULGARELLI-FRONDONI-MURIALDO 2005, pp. 144-145.

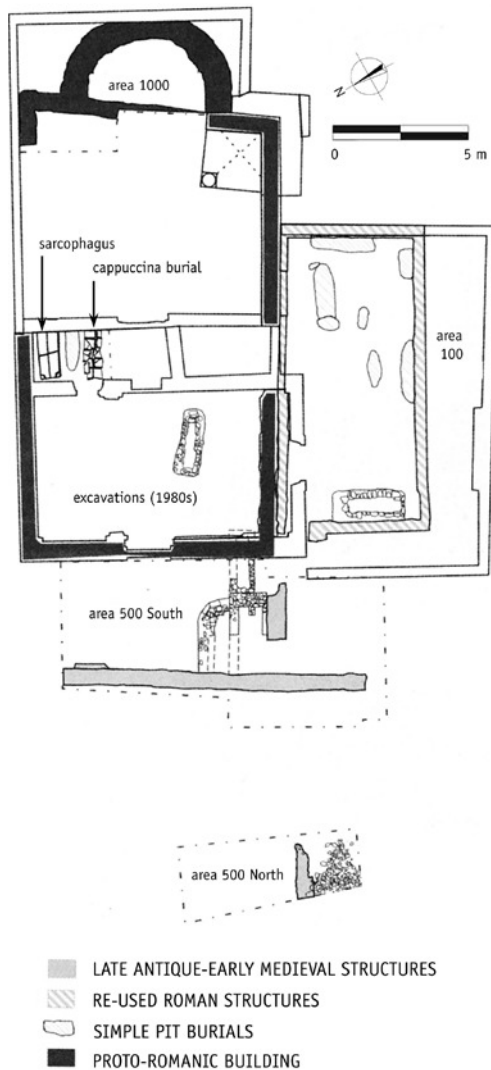


Fig. 3. Quiliano (Savona), San Pietro in Carpignano, layout with building phases.

village in the early Middle Ages and then partially used as a burial area from the 7th to the 9th century⁸.

3. Cemeteries and funerary rites in western Liguria

The characteristics of the settlements in the area of Finale, organised on a territorial basis, have gradually emerged from the latest archaeological excavations and from a critical review of previous findings. This territory included *vici*, located on the slopes of the valley systems, which in Late Antiquity underwent a period of apparent decline in terms of settlements after a more intense development phase during the Imperial Age. Some of these settlements were religious centres which formed the basis for widespread Christianisation of the rural areas⁹.

The necropolis discovered in 1956 on the western side of Gavone hill can be directly related to a Roman settlement. This rural cemetery contains cremation graves dating to the first part of the Imperial Age, alongside inhumation burials inside amphorae, in brick structures, with stone borders or in simple pits dug in the ground, dating to the 4th and 6th-7th centuries, whereas 1st and 2nd century burials appear to be lacking. The largest group of inhumation graves in the central and southern part of the

burial ground, arranged with the heads of the bodies facing north, can be attributed to the Late Antique phase. In almost all cases the burials are single and contain only one artefact, generally placed near the head of the deceased. Only one grave, constructed with vertically embedded stone slabs and a stone and brick cover, contains a multiple

⁸ MURIALDO-AROBBA-PALAZZI 2001, pp. 49-50; MURIALDO 2003, p. 157.

⁹ MURIALDO-PALAZZI-AROBBA 2001, p. 59; BULGARELLI-TORRE 2008, p. 272.



Fig. 4. Finale Ligure (Savona), Archaeological Museum, beaker or oil-lamp made of pale green glass with blue elements dating to the 4th century.

burial, probably a family, while the skeletons of two individuals have been found in the same grave. Two amphorae burials consisting of «African II» type cylindrical containers in the case of the first grave, dated to the 4th century owing to the presence of a glass beaker-oil lamp with blue appliqué elements, and a Tunisian cylindrical container in the case of the second burial, with a brick base attached by mortar¹⁰ (fig. 4), belong to the Late Antique period.

The type of burial, the lack of grave goods such as day-to-day clothing or personal possessions, and the presence of a household object placed near the head of the body, probably connected with continuation of the rite of a symbolic food offering (globular cups with handles, carinated cups, jars, one fluted jug made of imported common ware) indicate that these burials belong

to the Late Roman period, in which there is a total absence of elements referring to autochthonous funerary customs. The presence in general of a single pottery object placed in the grave is found in numerous cemeteries of this period which can be attributed to the Romans, who were also present in other Italian areas. In the cemetery of the Priámar (Savona), and in Sardinia, mainly jugs have been found, while in northern Italy, such as in Friuli or in transalpine areas, individual drinking vessels or jars dominate, as found in Perti¹¹ (fig. 5).

An additional group of graves was probably concentrated in the vicinity of the church of San Eusebio, the site of a brick fragment with a Christian epigraph of *Lucius Helv-[ius]* or *Helvidius*, dateable to 362 on the basis of the consular indication of Nevitta. This piece was re-used in the foundation of a medieval wall positioned to the southwest of San Eusebio, an area subsequently occupied by medieval burials. This engraved inscription represents one of the most ancient Christian epigraphs in northern Italy and provides reliable evidence of the early spread of Christianity in this territory, also in relation to the extensive road connections¹² (fig. 6).

Acquiring more information concerning the origins of the church of San Eusebio and the possible pre-existence of the present church prior to the 11th century building could improve our understanding of the transition between Late Antiquity and the

¹⁰ LAVAGNA 2001, pp. 109-111.

¹¹ MENNELLA-COCCOLUTO 1995, pp. 77-79; MURIALDO-PALAZZI-AROBBA 2001, p. 60; MURIALDO 2003, pp. 155-156.

¹² MURIALDO-PALAZZI-AROBBA 2001, pp. 62-63; MURIALDO 2003, pp. 156-157.

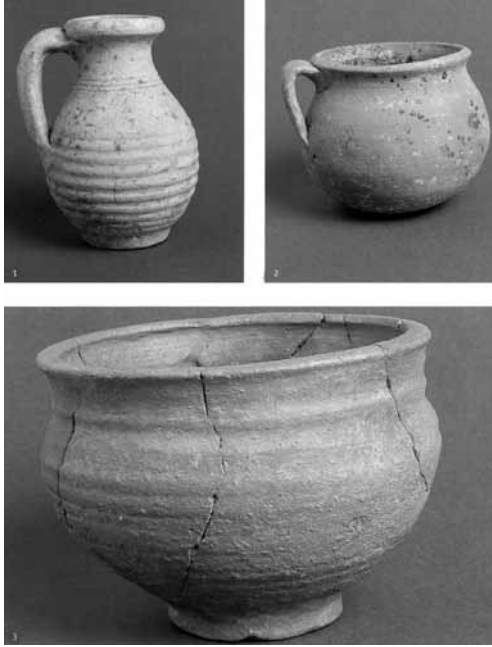


Fig. 5. Finale Ligure (Savona), Archaeological Museum, single-handled pottery jug dating to the 4th-5th century (a), single-handled globular pottery jug dating to the 5th-7th century (b), stick-engraved globular pottery jar dating to the 5th-7th century (c).



Fig. 6. Finale Ligure (Savona), Archaeological Museum, photographic reproduction of the funerary inscription of *Lucius* (a), graphic representation of the same funerary inscription (b).

Middle Ages in Perti. Although the epigraphic text of *Lucius* confirms a Christian presence in Perti as early as 362 and there is much evidence to suggest the presence of an early Christian building, the archaeological investigations conducted in the Sixties inside the church, and subsequently in the crypt below, have not provided any concrete proof to this effect. The discovery of sarcophagus covers made of «Pietra di Finale», re-used as elements for closing the passageway towards the proto-Romanic crypt, could constitute indirect evidence of a more ancient place of worship. These are double-pitched monolithic covers with lowered *acroteria angularia*, one of which is decorated with crosses in relief (one astylar and one with equilateral arms), based on a model which from the 4th century became very widespread both in the Mediterranean and on the other side of the Alps. Sarcophagus covers with *acroteria angularia* made of «Pietra del Finale» or other types of stone are widespread throughout western Liguria, and some have also been found in eastern Liguria. They can be dated to between the end of the 4th and the 5th century and may have continued to be used in the centuries immediately thereafter. In the case of Perti, the decoration with a processional astylar cross on one of the covers, according to an iconographic model which was widely echoed in the 8th-century Merovingian tombs in France, could point to the presence of an ecclesial group with a stabilised hierarchical order. Above all, however, these sarcophagi indicate the activity of local stone-cutters in the area of Finale, if not in Perti itself, who at a time of decline in the availability of quality materials such as marble, used «Pietra

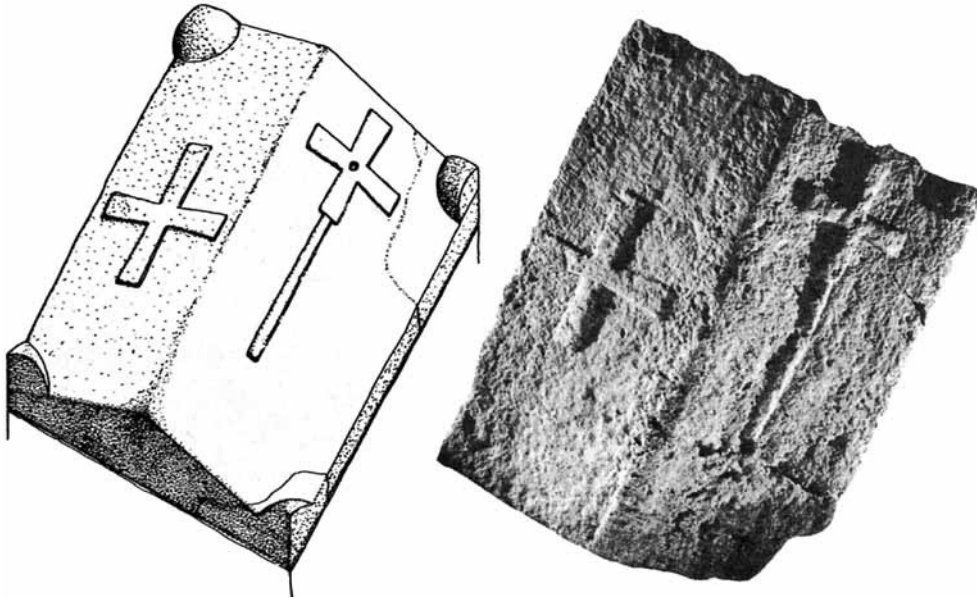


Fig. 7. Perti (Savona), crypt of San Eusebio, double-pitched sarcophagus in "Pietra del Finale" and its graphic representation.

di Finale» to meet, on a sub-regional scale, the needs of an elite clientele among whom there was a demand for privileged burials¹³ (fig. 7).

Some distinctive elements can be identified for the second rural necropolis known in the territory of Finale: the cemetery of Isasco, on the nearby Manie plateau. The differences compared to the cemetery of Perti concern the incidence of the various types of graves and, above all, the modes of expansion of the necropolis and the distribution of the graves during the different periods of use. At Perti, where the site is on a slope, the succession of graves appears to present a precise directional sequence, whereas at Isasco, on the plateau occupied by the cemetery, there is a greater mixture of Augustan, Tiberian-Claudian and Neronian-Flavian age cremation graves with later burials, at times arranged in orderly rows. At present we have no information on the settlement pertaining to this small cemetery that consists of 41 graves. The characteristics of the grave goods and the offerings of the cremation graves point to the presence of a privileged class, probably the owners of the *fundus* or those entrusted with the running of it, in an area, one of the few extensively cultivated stretches of level ground throughout this territory, in which the agricultural resources were fully exploited¹⁴.

On the basis of the simple burial graves and the reduction in grave goods, an

¹³ MURIALDO-PALAZZI-AROBBA 2001, p. 60.

¹⁴ MARTIN 1991, p. 164; PAROLI 1997, pp. 96-98; RIEMER 2000, pp. 76-90.

involution of the socio-economic conditions of the agricultural community can be identified in the later phase. In the case of Isasco, unlike Perti, only one grave contains a single artefact, a fluted common ware jug, probably of North African origin, which can be dated to between the 5th and the first half of the 6th century. This points to a fairly late chronology for this phase of the cemetery, confirmed by the intrusive presence in a cremation grave of the edge of a Keay LXI amphora from the end of the 6th-7th century.

The burials of this phase consist of graves with stone boundaries and stone slab covers, with partial delimitation, with protective stone elements arranged only around the head of the body, in a dirt pit without delimitation. The predominance of burials with stone boundaries, only one example of which has been found at Perti, and the lack of burials inside amphorae or in brick structures, are further elements of differentiation. Here again, however, the characteristics of the cemetery's late phase confirm its use by the local Romanised population, since there is a complete lack of elements that can be referred to autochthonous cultures. Simple graves dug in the ground without any type of stone slab cover and delimited by stone elements (*Deckplattgräber*), rarely characterised by grave goods, are in fact typical of the Late Roman funerary tradition in the Mediterranean areas and in some Romanised transalpine regions, where they were used up to the beginning of the 7th century¹⁵.

Two other important cemeteries, again in the Finale area, are those located on the promontory of Capo Varigotti. A first burial ground on the slopes of the hill, before the construction of the church of S. Lorenzo, between the 6th and the 7th century, consisted of only a few burials in amphorae which were part of an unstructured cemetery complex. The only two burials known were made by re-using transport containers to house the body of the deceased, generally a child or in any case a very young person. One of them can be identified as a typical late cylindrical amphora of North African origin, while the second transport container probably consisted of a globular container of Aegean origin, decorated with engraved bands of comb-like lines, of the *Late Roman Amphorae 2* type, common between the 6th and 7th century in the Mediterranean basin controlled by the Byzantine economic power¹⁶.

These data need to be integrated with the information obtained from the emergency excavations carried out by the Liguria Archaeological Department on the same promontory where some burial pits dug directly in the rock and without any grave goods have been identified. The ¹⁴C examinations of the bone materials recovered confirmed the stratigraphic data, thus dating the burials to the 5th-6th century¹⁷.

The archaeological dig which discovered a Roman cemetery in Noli also helped to reconstruct the cemetery's successive use phases. From the 3rd century, with the gradual abandonment of cremation in favour of burial of the corpse, there is evidence of infant graves, according to the widespread type of «*enchytrismos*» burial. There are nine Late Antique graves in Noli, located mostly in the western belt of the sector examined, and arranged according to different orientations. In five cases they occupy

¹⁵ MURIALDO 2005, pp. 27-28; FRONDONI 2008, p. 171.

¹⁶ FRONDONI 2004, pp. 188-189.

¹⁷ ELEFANTE 2007, pp. 121-122.

areas left free by the cremation cemetery; the other four were found near cremation graves and one of these is even located in the limited space between the only two burials with a monumental structure. The random nature and apparent disorder in the arrangement of the amphora burials could be interpreted as an unplanned exceptional use of the cemetery in this phase, also in relation to historical factors difficult to “read” in the archaeological stratification. The chronology for the infant burials can be deduced from the dating of the amphorae, mostly of North African production, which appear to cover a period between the end of the 2nd to the 5th century. No grave goods have been found inside the individual graves and the bones, which are extremely fragile, have been conserved only in very few cases due to the acidity of the soil, making it difficult to identify the original position of the children, often presumably foetal¹⁸.

In the case of Noli, the transition from Roman and Late Antique burials to those of the early Middle Ages appears to have taken place without any interruption: the archaeological evidence indicates that the graves tend to overlap only in some cases, and in the new organisation of the burial space it would seem that the more ancient burials were respected. The graves, arranged mainly in a north-south direction, are located at the northern limit of the excavation sector. Of those examined, at least seventeen can be attributed with certainty to the same phase and are of three different types with slight individual variations: burials of adults (or more rarely infants) in a simple pit dug in the ground, burials of adults in coffins with re-use of sarcophagus fragments made of «Pietra del Finale» and burials of adults in a coffin with stones, slabs or pebbles positioned edgewise. Almost all the burials belonged to single adult individuals, but in three cases triple burials have been documented and, in one pit, there was an adult with a child alongside. All the bodies were buried without grave goods and only one grave presented, as ritual elements, a mound of pebbles with an amphora above the skull and a second symbol positioned near the bones of the chest¹⁹ (fig. 8).

In the burials in Noli, the intact base of a sarcophagus lined a pit used for several burials, in another grave it formed the cover, while a brick fragment positioned edgewise closed the pebble structure arranged around the body. Only in one case are older structures re-used as an ossuary. The lack of dating materials inside the graves makes it very difficult to accurately date the individual burials although, on the basis of type comparison and structural characteristics, they would appear to belong to a period between the 5th and the 7th century.

4. *Centres of worship and privileged burials*

In the 6th and 7th centuries, the presence in *Liguria Maritima* of a class of local *possessores* operating alongside the Byzantine civil and military hierarchies emerges from the archaeological and, above all, epigraphic evidence rather than from the

¹⁸ ELEFANTE 2007, p. 122.

¹⁹ ELEFANTE 2007, p. 122.

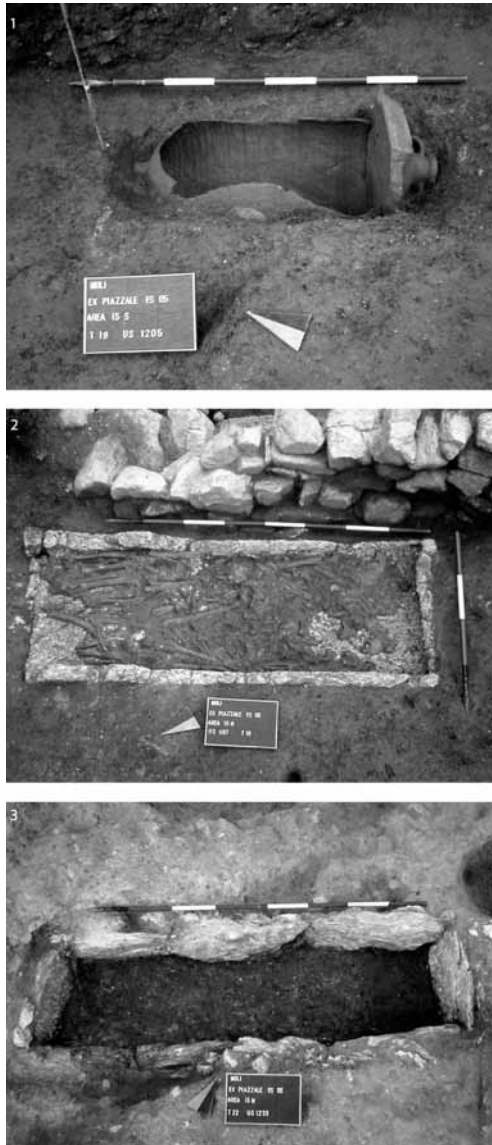


Fig. 8. Noli (Savona), Late Antique and early medieval cemetery, grave amphora (1), multiple burial in fragmentary sarcophagus made of Finale stone (2), grave with stone slab enclosure (3).

rare written sources. The presence in the peripheral areas, as opposed to the main urban centres, of burial groups located in the vicinity of baptismal churches (San Paragorio of Noli, Pieve del Finale, basilica of Capo Don in Riva Ligure) directly indicate the presence of a social class in which there was a demand for privileged funeral sites, with burials in sarcophagi or masonry work²⁰. The social and cultural level of these wealthy classes was expressed also in elaborate funerary epigraphs, which sometimes contained poems in metric verse. This is the case of the *bonae memoriae Maria, claro veniens de stirpe parentum*, buried in the basilica of Riva Ligure at Capo Don (Imperia), that of the *infante Paula*, whose funerary inscription in dactylic verse comes from the parish church of Finale (Savona), or the later 6th-7th century *domina Lidoria*, re-used in a burial in the church of San Paragorio in Noli (Savona)²¹.

The ecclesial complex of Riva Ligure comprises church and atrium in one single structure, with «star»-shaped octagonal font, and a cemetery with various types of graves including, in particular, numerous sarcophagi made of «Pietra del Finale»²².

The baptismal church of San Giovanni Battista in Finale Ligure (Savona), with an attached settlement formed over buildings of the Imperial Age, constituted the main religious epicentre of the territory around Finale in Late Antiquity. The early Christian baptismal complex was located in an

²⁰ PERGOLA-BATTISTELLI-COCCHINI-GIACOBELLI-LORETI-MARTORELLI 1989, pp. 45-46; FRONDONI 2007c, pp. 73-74.

²¹ MENNELLA-COCCOLUTO 1995, pp. 79-121; MARTINO 2003, pp. 153-154; MURIALDO 2003, pp. 157-158; FRONDONI 2007c, pp. 76-77.

²² FRONDONI 2007b, pp. 380-381; FRONDONI 2008, pp. 177-178.

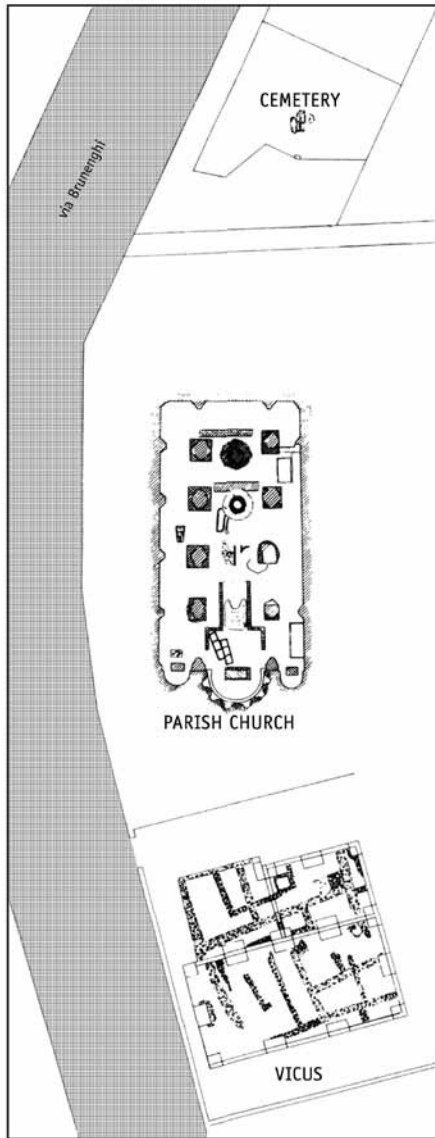


Fig. 9. Finale Ligure (Savona), layout of Finale parish church (1) and dwelling structures (2).

area occupied by a pre-existing Imperial Age settlement. The remains of one rectangular hall with single apse incorporated by the proto-Romanic phase and an opposing narthex, a first octagonal font, partially covered by the foundation of the third left-hand pillar of the three-nave church, and indications of a floor in *opus signinum* are all that remain of the early 5th-century ecclesial structure. In the central part of the structure, in front of the apse area, an enclosure has been identified measuring 3.50 x 1.50 metres, delimited by a thin wall and paved in *cocciopesto*, initially interpreted as a *schola cantorum*, but probably a liturgical enclosure in front of the altar²³. Although the conditions in which it was found and the lack of direct connections with the older wall structures make it arbitrary as a precise chronological indicator, the funerary epigraph of *Paula*, discovered in numerous fragments and dated to 517 on the basis of the consular indication, can probably also be attributed to the early Christian church. Two brick graves, positioned near the presbyterial sector, with the body inside a Keay VIIIA type African container, currently dated to the 8th century can be attributed to the Late Antique church. A small Ising 8 type unguentary vase, which can be referred to pre-existing Roman burials pertaining to the Imperial Age, with a chronological span ranging from the Augustan-Flavian phase to the end of the 1st century, comes from the inside of the baptismal church, together with other glass fragments, perhaps medieval lamps, found in wall remains located in the central part of the church. The religious complex could therefore have been constructed within the perimeter of a

previous burial ground which included Imperial Age burials, which should be related to the wall structures and the dwelling levels found in the southern part of San Giovanni Battista. A group of graves found only a short distance from the church can also be

²³ MURIALDO 2001, p. 53; FRONDONI 2003, p. 96; BULGARELLI-FRONDONI-MURIALDO 2005, p. 165.



Fig. 10. Noli (Savona), San Paragorio, detail of semicircular apse of baptistery and adjacent privileged grave with arcosolium (a), glass bottle-balsam container from the arcosolium grave (b), marble slab with funerary inscription of the *domina Lidoria* (c).

referred to this cemetery: these consist of a brick cremation grave, in a very poor state and not dateable, a second cremation grave with coffin delimited by Roman bricks, while the third, the best preserved, consists of a typical cappuccina grave with «tube» opening for ritual offerings, dated on the basis of the grave goods to the middle of the 2nd century A.D. Lastly, a burial in a double amphora, the first represented by a cylindrical container of the late Imperial Age and the second by a globular amphora of Aegean origin, type Agorà 236, has been attributed to the Late Antique period²⁴ (fig. 9).

Along the outer side of the early Christian worship complex of San Paragorio in Noli (Savona) four masonry graves have been found (without burials as they had been plundered in antique times), constructed around the same time as the religious centre. In addition to these graves there is also a privileged arcosolium tomb, leaning against the apse sector, found in the first excavations and re-used several times (perhaps for members of the same family) up to the beginning of the

early Middle Ages. The excavations carried out in 1972 in the fill above the tomb had revealed a semicircular marble slab bearing the funerary inscription of a *domina Lidoria*, eventually dated to between the end of the 6th century and the beginning of the 7th, a period corresponding to the central phase of the Byzantine domination of *Liguria Maritima*. The latest excavations in the sector between the apse of the baptistery and the arcosolium tomb have led to a new interpretation of the walls of the building, revealing its various construction phases and highlighting some new features with respect to the phases documented during the previous excavations. A fourth hydraulic system, within the one previously considered the baptistery's most recent system of channels, has also been identified. The excavations also confirmed that the sequence of restructuring operations carried out on the building were concentrated over a very limited time span, between the beginning of the 5th century (when the first channel system was built, thus during the same period as a building with known layout) and the late 6th century (the date of construction of the arcosolium tomb

²⁴ MURIALDO 2001, p. 54; MURIALDO 2003, p. 157; FRONDONI 2007a, p. 756.

which seals all the previous phases, against the apse part of the baptistery). Therefore, the dating of the tomb cannot be based only on the glass bottle found inside, as previously assumed, but must take into consideration new elements which come from studies of the most recent finds and which would appear to attribute the construction of the tomb to around the first half of the 6th century²⁵ (fig. 10).

After the Langobard conquest of *Liguria Maritima*, it took a few generations for the members of local society to adapt to the new situation, which left much less substantial archaeological evidence.

5. Conclusions

For some time now, scholars have been quite interested in the gradual process which, during the centuries that saw the demise of Roman political authority over the western part of the empire, led to the decline in the deposition of grave goods. Rarely, however, have detailed examinations of the modes of deposition and theoretical reflections on the meaning of this process gone beyond the attempt to indicate its causes or clarify its ethnic components within the rigid contrast between the local-Roman demographic substratum and the Germanic one. Thus, the disappearance of grave goods has been seen as one of the results of the development of Christianity, consequently classifying as pagan and “backward” the burials with grave goods still found after the end of the 4th century. At the same time numerous typological studies have been carried out on grave goods to clarify their chronology and the ethnic origins of the persons buried²⁶.

Alongside these graves with characteristic elements reminiscent of the funerary culture of the Germanic peoples, between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, there are also others with grave goods, varying greatly in quality, without what are clearly Germanic artefacts. The burials of this type, covering the period between the second half of the 5th to the 7th century, and present in different contexts in western Liguria, are the subject of this study.

Two time-related adjectives which occur frequently in this text, «Late Roman» and «early medieval», are not used to impose an *a priori* ethnic definition of the realities they indicate; on the contrary, they are used in the belief that the productive origins of the grave goods cannot provide a unique indication for establishing the ethnic group of the persons buried. The finding of bones and artefacts in a grave does not take into account the culture of the persons buried, the culture of the civilisation that buried them and the culture that produced the artefacts found in the graves. Identifying a total or partial correspondence between these cultural traditions may be one of the consequences of this relationship but it is certainly not the pre-condition for it. There are now scientific and historical grounds that demonstrate a certain fluidity and a possible osmosis both between the various Germanic ethnic groups and between these and the native elements, and appear to indicate that with any simplification

²⁵ FRONDONI 2007c, pp. 74-77; FRONDONI 2008, pp. 172-175.

²⁶ BRATHER 2007, pp. 304-308.

there is the risk of distorting and therefore misrepresenting the historic reality²⁷.

The presence in the cemeteries examined of few but significant artefacts is a fact of considerable interest which, if extended in the completion of this study also to the burial areas of the ancient Roman *municipia*, could reconfirm the social value of the funerary practices, their function as an element of cohesion, or rather construction of the local communities. The lack of objects classifiable as Christian (which should not necessarily be understood as an intentional declaration of faith) also in graves of persons who were probably Christian, and therefore the impossibility of determining the creed of the deceased on the basis of the grave goods appears to be a further confirmation of the fundamental importance of local family traditions in the funerary sphere and an initial lack of interest by the church in regulating this sector: in fact, there appears to have been a willingness on the part of the clergy to acknowledge and reinterpret these funerary activities. Moreover, the justification for the practice of burying artefacts together with the deceased appears to lie more in a feeling of pity for the dead and in an ability to understand their future needs, than in a solid eschatological vision as an explicit alternative to the Catholic-Christian perspective.

In the rural territories of western Liguria, between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, this interpretation of the needs of the dead in the afterworld was expressed as particular attention towards their person and body. This could explain both the practice of burying the dead clothed, in an extremely hierarchical society in which the type of clothing also served to distinguish the rank of the person, and certain attentions that began to be paid to the «comfort» of the dead in the grave and, in some cases, to a sort of interior decoration and frequent deposition of elements that would appear to be personal possessions of the deceased, and pottery or glass containers in particular. Special attention was focused on the personality of the deceased both inside the grave, with grave goods and structural elements, but also outside through inscriptions and symbols.

This interiorisation could be interpreted as an indirect reflection of the gradual spread of a new vision of life and death, an exciting possibility but one which, at the moment, remains a hypothesis.

ABBREVIATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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²⁷ POSSENTI 2007, pp. 281-289.

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fig. 1 n. 2 (*Tabula Peutingeriana*)

fig. 3 (from FRONDONI 2007, partially modified, p. 773)

fig. 4 (from MARCENARO 2003, p. 275)

fig. 5 (from MARCENARO 2003, p. 274)

fig. 6 (from MURIALDO 2003, partially modified, p. 155)

fig. 7 (from MURIALDO 2003, p. 156)

fig. 8 (from ELEFANTE 2007, pp. 121-122)

fig. 9 (from BULGARELLI-FRONDONI-MURIALDO 2005, p. 166)

fig. 10 (from FRONDONI 2007b, pp. 74-77)